

KEY FINDINGS

In 2017, the state of religious freedom in Turkey worsened. Proposed changes in the educational curriculum, an increase in government funding solely for Sunni mosques, and a lack of movement with respect to legal status and registration for non-Muslim communities have led Turkey on a downward trend. Turkey's longstanding strict secularization prevents religious communities—including Sunni Muslims—from obtaining full legal status; that being said, members of different faith groups do have their own private schools, places of worship, foundations, and media organizations. The majority of the other longstanding religious freedom concerns remain unresolved, including the return of expropriated minority properties, the delay in providing dual citizenship to Greek Orthodox Metropolitans so they can participate in the church's Holy Synod, and equal funding for religious minority community buildings from the public budget. Moreover, the continued unjust detention of Protestant Pastor Andrew Brunson since October 2016 has had a chilling effect on Christians living in the country. In recent years the government

has taken steps to return some expropriated properties to religious minority communities. The government also funded efforts to restore two historic religious minority properties, the Greek Orthodox Sumela Monastery and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, both of which are expected to open in 2018. Additionally, in 2017 the government removed the longstanding legal ban on wearing Islamic headscarves in the Turkish military and police, a move welcomed by Muslims in the country. In October 2017, a USCIRF delegation visited Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, and met with Turkish government officials and religious minority community leaders. The delegation also met with detained Pastor Brunson in Kırkları Prison, the first non-consular, non-family delegation to visit him. Based on these conditions, in 2018 USCIRF again places the government of Turkey on Tier 2 for engaging in or tolerating religious freedom violations that meet at least one of the elements of the "systematic, ongoing, egregious" standard for designation as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA).

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Press the Turkish government, at the highest levels, to free Pastor Brunson from detention immediately and unconditionally;
- Apply the [Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act](#), [Executive Order 13818](#), or other relevant targeted tools, to deny U.S. visas to and block the U.S. assets of specific officials and agencies identified as responsible for violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief;
- Urge the Turkish government to ensure the education curriculum remains inclusive of all of Turkey's religious groups, and does not only include lessons and principles that are applicable to Turkey's Sunni Muslim majority;
- Urge the Turkish government to allow students to be exempted from religious courses without disclosing their religious and philosophical convictions, as mandated by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR);
- Press the Turkish government to streamline measures that would permit non-Sunni Muslim faith communities to apply for government funding to support the construction, maintenance, and upkeep of their houses of worship;
- Urge the Turkish government to fully comply with ECtHR rulings on freedom of religion or belief, including by removing the field for religious affiliation on national ID cards' microchips and recognizing Alevi *cemevis* as legal places of worship and Alevi *dedes* as religious leaders;
- Press the Turkish government to publicly rebuke government officials who make anti-Semitic statements or other derogatory statements about religious communities in Turkey;
- Press the Turkish government to fulfill private and public promises that the Greek Orthodox Halki Seminary would be reopened, and to permit other religious communities to open and operate their seminaries; and
- Urge the Turkish government to provide increased security to religious communities to prevent attacks on religious houses of worship.

COUNTRY FACTS

FULL NAME

Republic of Turkey

GOVERNMENT

Parliamentary Republic

POPULATION

80,845,215

GOVERNMENT-RECOGNIZED RELIGIONS/FAITHS

Islam, Armenian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, and Judaism (the latter three being the Lausanne Treaty-recognized minorities)

RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY*

99.8% Muslim (mostly Sunni)

0.2% other, including Jewish, Armenian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Bulgarian Orthodox, Chaldean, Baha'i, Syriac, Protestant, and Jehovah's Witness

*CIA World Factbook

BACKGROUND

Since July 2016, Turkey has struggled with its security situation in the aftermath of a failed coup d'etat. The Turkish government alleges the coup attempt was orchestrated by Fethullah Gülen, a U.S.-based cleric and the leader of the Hizmet Movement, which the Turkish government now refers to as the Fethullahist Terror Organization (FETO).

Since the attempted coup, the government has dismissed more than 100,000 public servants from their jobs; shut down more than 1,200 schools, 15 universities, and 195 media outlets; and arrested 73 journalists—the highest number of journalists arrested by any country in 2017, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. The government also has arrested thousands of suspected followers of the Hizmet Movement and confiscated their property. Human rights activists, including Amnesty International's Turkey Director, Taner Kilic, are among those who have been arrested and charged with membership in a terrorist organization, which has had

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a chilling effect on human rights and religious freedom advocates in Turkey. Aykan Erdemir, a former member of the Turkish parliament and well-known advocate for religious freedom and religious minority rights, was also recently charged with FETO membership; the government issued a warrant for his arrest and confiscated his assets in Turkey. In this environment, religious minority groups

have maintained a low profile and have largely ceased pursuing their previous longstanding demands. In addition, the detention of Pastor Brunson, who lived in Izmir for more than 23 years, has left minorities in Turkey with a sense of fear.

According to the government, 99 percent of Turkey's population is Muslim, and 80 percent of that number (64 million)

is Sunni Muslim. Between 20 and 30 million are Alevi, a religion the Turkish government counts as Muslim, although some Alevis self-identify as part of a unique non-Muslim culture. Turkey's non-Muslim religious minorities comprise less than 0.2 percent of the overall

population, and mostly are members of the Jewish, Armenian Orthodox, and Greek Orthodox communities, the three faiths recognized under the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. Turkey also has small communities of the Roman Catholic, Bulgarian Orthodox, Chaldean, Baha'i, Syriac, Protestant, and Jehovah's Witness faiths.

The 1982 Turkish constitution provides for the freedom of belief and worship and the private dissemination of religious ideas, and prohibits discrimination on religious grounds. Nevertheless, the state interprets secularism to require state control over religious communities, including their practices and houses of worship. No religion enjoys full legal status. The Ministry of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) maintains control over the practice of Islam in Turkey; all other religions are under the auspices of the General Directorate for Foundations (*Vakıflar*).

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS 2017

Education

Primary and secondary school students in Turkey are required to complete the "Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge Course," which Turkish officials claim is necessary to raise law-abiding and moral Turkish citizens. Because the course is rooted in Islamic principles, non-Muslim students from the Lausanne Treaty communities—Greek Orthodox, Jewish, and Armenian Orthodox—may be exempted from the course. Members of other faiths, including Alevis, are not permitted exemption, and more often than not even members of the Lausanne-recognized faiths do not opt for exemption so as not to be ostracized by fellow students and teachers. In 2014, the ECtHR held that Turkey

could not mandate students to disclose their religious identity, as it was in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights. It also held that the course should not be compulsory and that the curriculum should be neutral as far as religions are concerned. Unfortunately, religious minority groups, especially Alevi community members, informed USCIRF during an October 2017 visit to Turkey that the government has yet to comply with the ruling.

The education curriculum in Turkey's public schools is set to change in 2018. According to numerous human rights reports, the Education Ministry has revised over 170 curriculum topics. In an effort to raise what President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan called a "pious generation" of Turks, the ministry will remove evolutionary concepts like natural selection, along with any mention of Charles Darwin. The government claims that evolution will only be taught in high school because it is difficult for younger students to grasp; secular critics claim it is being done to infuse the secular curriculum with religious-based ideas. Other changes include teaching jihad as love of homeland in an effort to refocus on the spiritual meaning of the term rather than the violent connotation extremists have emphasized. Critics of the changes argue that previously Turkey was one of the only Muslim-majority countries to include in its curriculum lessons on environmental protection, human rights, Darwinism, gender equality, compassion toward AIDS patients, and openness toward various lifestyles, and that the proposed changes are indicative of the "Islamization" of the curriculum.

Finally, *imam-hatip* schools—vocational schools initially created to train imams after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire—have grown in popularity. While enrollment hovered around 60,000 in 2002, there are currently more than one million students (one-tenth of all public-school students) enrolled in more than 4,000

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people rather than one for every 50,000 as was mandated previously. The age of admission has also been lowered from 14 years to 10 years of age.

National Identity Cards

In 2010, the ECtHR ruled that a mandatory listing of religious affiliation on Turkish identification cards violated the European Convention. Thereafter, the Turkish

parliament passed a law removing the requirement from the front of the cards. The new identification cards, which went into effect in January 2017, do not show the holder's religious identification, although the information can be found on the card's microchip. Religious communities remain concerned that information on the microchip may lead to discrimination in the workplace and other places where the microchip can be read. Additionally, small religious minorities, such as members of the Baha'i faith, informed USCIRF during its visit that their religion is not listed as an option in the government form for the ID cards, although it was an option in years past.

Alevis

Alevis are the largest religious minority community in Turkey, numbering between 20 million and 30 million people. While the government considers them Muslim, not all Alevis identify themselves as such. In 2015, the ECtHR held that Alevi students should be excused from attending the compulsory religious class. The ECtHR also ruled that only Alevi leaders could determine the faith (Islam or not) to which their community belonged. These rulings have not yet been implemented by the government.

Alevis have struggled to obtain legal authorization for their "gathering places" (*cemevis*), which number between 5,000 and 7,000. They consistently have been denied access to public funds to support the maintenance of the *cemevis*, unlike mosques, which do receive Diyanet funding. In April 2015, the ECtHR held that the Turkish government was violating the European Convention by not recognizing Alevi places of worship and religious leaders. As a result, in 2016 the Turkish government designated 126 Alevi *dedes* (faith leaders), located in several European countries, as "field experts." However, Alevi community leaders informed USCIRF during its visit that experts only are permitted in the field for 10 to 12 days during the holy month of Muharram, and that usually those chosen enjoy close relations with the government and are not necessarily identified for their religious credentials. Moreover,

no Alevis currently serve in critical government positions, including as governors or police chiefs. Finally, the community has been consulted on the depiction of Alevis in textbooks by the Ministry of Education, and, according to Alevi group leaders, some of their suggested revisions have been implemented.

Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism remains problematic for Turkey's Jewish community, but it has not worsened from previous years, according to community leaders with whom the USCIRF delegation met in October 2017. Print and social media still produce anti-Semitic material, the 2017 Hrant Dink Foundation reports confirmed. In 2017, the television program "The Last Sultan" that aired on public Turkish television reinforced stereotypes of Jews. In July 2017, events at the Temple Mount, in which two Israeli policemen were killed and metal detectors were placed at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, drew large protests across the Muslim world, including in Turkey. Alperen Hearths, a far-right ultranationalist and Islamist youth group, staged a protest in front of central Istanbul's Neve Salom synagogue. Protesters kicked the doors of the synagogue, threw stones, and were heard saying, "If you prevent our freedom of worship there then we will prevent your freedom of worship here." After this incident, the Turkish government increased security for the synagogue.

Since 2008, Turkey has been the only majority-Muslim country that actively contributes to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. For the third year in a row, on January 27, 2017, the Turkish government

held a Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony, in which the deputy prime minister participated. In December 2017, also for the third time, Chanuka was celebrated publicly at Neve Salom, Istanbul's largest synagogue, with government officials in attendance. During Chanuka, President Erdoğan

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representation in memory of the Jewish refugees who lost their lives on the vessel *Struma*, which was sunk in the Black Sea on February 24, 1942.

Greek Orthodox

The Turkish government continued to dictate that only Turkish citizens can be members of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Holy Synod, which elects the community's Patriarch. Since 2010, however, only 30 foreign Metropolitans have been approved for dual citizenship, which the community contends is unreasonable interference with the internal election process of the Patriarchate. Additionally, the Greek Orthodox Theological School of Halki remains closed, as it has been since 1971, due to a constitutional decision to shut down all religious and theological schools at the time. However, the Ecumenical Patriarchate

contends that since then, thousands of *imam-hatip* schools have been opened, and therefore Halki Seminary should also be allowed to reopen for the sake of the community's survival. The Turkish government continues to cite the Greek government's restrictions on Muslims in Western Thrace as the primary reason for Halki Seminary's continued closure, based on the principle of reciprocity in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. Lack of legal status for the Patriarchate, like all religious groups, continues to prohibit the community from registering property in its name. Instead, the Patriarch has been required to register property in his own personal name. Petitions from the Patriarchate for the return of historical properties from the state also remain outstanding.

In mid-2016, the Patriarch requested a meeting with President Erdoğan to discuss his community's concerns; by the end of the reporting period, there had been no response. Nevertheless, President Erdoğan invited the Patriarch to National Day celebrations as well as other state events during 2017. The Patriarch remains an active convener of interfaith dialogue among Turkey's religious minorities.

Protestants

The Protestant population in Turkey is estimated to be between 6,000 and 7,000 people. There continued to be reports of Protestant churches being vandalized and pas-

tors being targeted with hate speech via text messages, Facebook, and e-mails in 2017. The community informed the USCIRF delegation during its visit that the government had not addressed their concerns or provided sufficient protection to targeted churches or pastors.

In October 2016, Turkish authorities detained Pastor Andrew Brunson, a U.S. citizen who has lived in Izmir, Turkey, for 23 years and led a small congregation of approximately 60 people. In October 2017, the USCIRF delegation visited Pastor Brunson in Kiriklar Prison, the first non-family, non-consular delegation to meet with him. As of the end of the reporting period,

Pastor Brunson and his lawyers had yet to see the indictment or the secret evidence and witness the government claims can link the pastor to FETO. He has been told that the evidence claims that he

attempted to "overthrow the Turkish government" and "undermine the constitution." According to Turkey's Association of Protestant Churches, over the past several years, at least 100 pastors have been forced to leave Turkey due to government refusal to renew visas or other permits.

Sunni Muslims

The Sunni Muslim majority population, other than those alleged to have ties to Fethullah Gülen, has seen improvements in religious freedom conditions since the AK Party government came to power in 2002. Generally, Sunni Muslim students have felt more comfortable asking for time off to make Friday prayers, an act that was not tolerated in past years. In February 2017, the ban on wearing Islamic headscarves in the Turkish police and military was removed. The Turkish military, the most secular institution in the Turkish state, had banned the veil since the 1980s.

Thousands of followers of Fethullah Gülen have been purged from government service; others have been arrested, of whom some have been tortured while in detention, according to an October 2017 Human Rights Watch report. After the 2016 coup d'état attempt, Turkish government officials have referred to Gülen members as belonging to a "parallel state." The

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Ministry of Religious Affairs has declared that Gülen followers are “perverted in faith,” and it publishes weekly Friday sermons, read in every mosque on Fridays, that include verbal harassment of them.

Religious Minority Properties

Unlike Muslim mosques, which register with the Diyanet, religious minority organizations register with the Vakıflar. Funding for non-Muslim houses of worship comes out of the budget of the Vakıflar, which is too limited to meet the needs of the many church and synagogues that are eligible and in need of funding. Turkish government officials told USCIRF that in order to facilitate increased funding for non-Muslim houses of worship, the government is considering creating a Vakıflar within the Diyanet, a move that would allow funding to come out of the growing budget of the Diyanet.

Historically, the Turkish government has expropriated religious minority properties. In 2011, the government issued a decree allowing a one-year period for religious minority foundations to apply for the return of, or compensation for, properties seized by the government in previous decades. Between 1936 and 2011, the government seized thousands of properties belonging to Christian and Jewish religious foundations. The 2011 decree allowed only for the Lausanne Treaty minority faiths—the Armenian Orthodox Church, Greek Orthodox Church, and Jewish community—to apply for the return of

property that had been registered in 1936. Since this decree, the government returned a total of 333 properties and provided compensation for 21 properties. Various minority foundations have applied for the return of more than 1500 properties, totaling a value of more than 2.5 billion Turkish lira. In addition to returning or providing compensation for properties, in 2017 the Turkish government paid for the utility costs of 419 minority places of worship, including 379 churches, 24 chapels, and 39 synagogues.

The government has funded the reconstruction of select historical churches. The Greek Orthodox Sumela

Monastery, which has been undergoing a restoration partly funded by the government since September 2015, is scheduled to reopen in August 2018. Additionally, the construction of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in Istanbul has been underway since 2013, when the property in central Istanbul was returned to the foundation affiliated with the church. President Erdoğan and Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov attended the ceremony for the church, which opened in January 2018. The government also has undertaken the renovation of four churches that were destroyed between 2015 and 2016 in clashes between the Turkish military and the terrorist-designated Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in southeastern Turkey. Other properties have been renovated, and future projects, according to the Turkish authorities, include the Istanbul Turisina Monastery, Kili Central Synagogue, Hatay Yayladağı Greek Orthodox Church, and Iskenderun Arsuz Maryo Hanna Church.

Hagia Sophia

For several years, the Christian community in Turkey and beyond has raised concerns about a potential change in the status of the historic Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Despite the Hagia Sophia’s legal status as a museum since 1935, some Muslims—including Turkish parliamentarians—have called for it to be opened as a mosque. During USCIRF’s October 2017 visit, Turkish officials stated that the government had no intention to change the Hagia Sophia’s legal status.

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Women and Religious Freedom

In November 2017, the Turkish parliament passed a bill, signed into law by President Erdoğan, to recognize marriages by Sunni Muslim muftis, giving government-approved clerics the same powers to perform marriages as civil authorities. Critics of this law claim that it may open the door for marriages under the age of 18, the legal age to marry, because some muftis, especially

in rural areas, may turn a blind eye to younger brides. The organization Girls Not Brides reported that Turkey has a high rate of child marriages, with 15 percent of girls married under the age of 18. The government argues that this law was intended to reduce the number of unregistered marriages by encouraging religious families to come forward and be married by a state-approved mufti. Even if this is correct, the law is discriminatory in another way: only Sunni Muslim muftis can perform marriages; priests, rabbis, and leaders of other faiths cannot.

U.S. POLICY

Although Turkey is a strategic partner of the United States and member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the U.S.-Turkey relationship became severely strained and significantly deteriorated in 2017, as the Turkish government exercised increasingly authoritarian measures. While the United States and the Global Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) utilized Incirlik Air Base in Turkey

to launch their air operations, the Turkish government disapproved of the United States' support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—and specifically the People's Protection Units (YPG), which are Kurdish-dominated—to combat ISIS inside of Syria. The Turkish government repeatedly claimed that the YPG included elements of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a Kurdish nationalist organization that both Turkey and the United States have designated as a terrorist organization. YPG claims it is independent from the PKK.

In addition, the Turkish government continued to put pressure on the United States to extradite Gülen, who currently resides in the United States, so that he can be prosecuted for the coup d'état attempt. Meanwhile, since October 2016 the United States government, as well as members of the U.S. Congress, have pressed for the release of detained Pastor Brunson, a U.S. citizen. President Donald Trump, in a meeting with President Erdoğan in May, as well as Vice President Mike Pence, in a meeting with Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım in November, urged Pastor Brunson's release. In March, then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson met with Norine

Brunson, wife of Pastor Brunson, in Ankara. Other issues affecting the relationship included a series of legal cases against both Turks and Americans, such as the charges against President Erdoğan's bodyguards for beating protestors in Washington, DC; the prosecution in New York of a Turkish gold trader, Reza Zarrab, for evading sanctions on Iran; and the Turkish government charging Turkish nationals working in the American consulate with alleged FETO affiliations. Since 2011, the United States has provided nearly \$572 million in funding for refugees in Turkey through the United Nations and other international organizations. Turkey is hosting at least 3.4 million registered Syrian refugees from various religious faiths who fled to Turkey to escape persecution by the Bashar al-Assad regime and

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ISIS. U.S. funding has supported psychosocial programs, health and livelihood programs, and prevention and response to gender-based violence, as well as tents, blankets, schools, and teacher stipends.

The United States has continued to urge Turkish officials to prioritize religious freedom when possible, including discouraging hateful and discriminatory language against Armenians, Jews, and other religious minority groups. U.S. officials have highlighted the need to keep the Hagia Sophia as a museum, emphasizing its importance as a symbol of coexistence between religions. Reopening Halki Seminary and returning properties to religious minority groups are issues that remain of keen interest to the United States.